

BOOK REVIEW

Why God? Explaining Religious Phenomena. By Rodney Stark.

West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2017, 304 pp.

Rodney Stark treats us to an outstanding new work in the sociology of religion. Beginning his treatise by challenging several accepted propositions about religion alerts the reader to be prepared for a few blatantly iconoclastic statements, iconoclastic in the sense of sociologists typically belittling religious dogma. Here Stark, in no uncertain terms, takes sociologists to task for making assumptions about religion, and for accepting those assumptions unquestioningly for well over one hundred years. First impressions are that perhaps Stark goes a little too far in his deconstruction, but that soon proves untrue. The author's writing is so clear, simple, and straightforward that the style almost fools the reader into expecting a complicated set of defensive arguments, when in reality Stark uses examples, empirical data, and simple reasoning to substantiate his position.

This volume begins by asking the reader to rethink several major assumptions about religion implicit in the theory of sociology's founders. Many readers will be somewhat alarmed that Stark has the audacity to question and dismantle the discipline's central and paradigmatic ideas. Most sociologists cut their teeth on Durkheim and Weber, and to take exception to established sociological dogma seems almost "sacrilegious." As any sociologist knows, Durkheim proposed that religion is simply "a set of beliefs and practices related to sacred things" and these "beliefs" unite adherents "into a single moral community." His two major assertions were, first, that religion need not contain a concept of the supernatural, and second, that religion originated mainly as a keeper of morality. Stark simply reminds us that many studies refute those claims, and yet most sociologists disregard the evidence.

For example, Stark observes that "belief in the existence of a god or gods has prevailed in every known society from the earliest times." Furthermore, most sociologists acknowledge that primitive societies did not need religion as a mechanism for moral social control. Some societies were too small to need a set of rules to unite an extended family unit, yet they still had religion and gods. Another example suggested by Stark is found in the religion of the Greeks and Romans. To this day, the reader of ancient history knows that the gods of both these world empires were anything but morally virtuous. Some of their conniving, mean shenanigans were particularly egregious. The gods' immoral escapades and selfish treatment of one another for ego-gratification were immoral by most standards, nor was their behavior noted for the purpose of reinforcing social control. Yet that is precisely what Durkheim would have us believe. While these two simple examples raise doubts about his theory, most sociologists still accept it. Nevertheless, Stark's work is indeed illuminating.

A significant portion of *Why God?* enumerates other misconceptions held by students of religion. Stark has little respect for social scientists who besmirch the founders of the great religions as being merely “delusional characters.” How could truly delusional and seemingly uneducated leaders possibly generate millions and even billions of disciples? Clearly these movements have grown rapidly and remained stable for thousands of years because their messages resonated to many generations. A strong contrasting example is seen in the work of Sigmund Freud. Arguably, Freud was a delusional scientist with a complement of psychological problems. He started a movement based on momentous empirical discoveries, but a mere one generation later his followers had repudiated many of his assertions. Now, with only some 75 years having passed, no one applies his teachings without significant critique. Contrary to Freud’s denial, there are good reasons the world historic religions are prosperous and growing in the contemporary world.

Another enlightening feature of this book is found in Stark’s trenchant critique of many misconceptions about religion. For example, according to Stark, religious affiliation is growing faster than world population growth. While it may be true that religion is losing some of its appeal in the Western World, religious affiliation is expanding exponentially in Africa, Asia, and South America. The myopic assertions of Western sociologists are to blame for publishing the misconception that religion is declining on the world stage. Similarly, the media proclaims that the more economically successful a population becomes, the less likely its members have an affinity for the spiritual. But Stark reports survey data showing that to be simply false. Survey data from most countries indicate that there is no difference in the level of spiritual interest between successful career women and homemakers. This is true in such diverse places as the US, Sweden, Mexico, and Africa, among others. Clearly “expert” predictions on the demise of religion have, thus far, proved, at the very least, to be untrue.

One aspect of Stark’s writing appears to detract from his arguments. The book is organized as a set of some 190 “propositions” about religion. These propositions are purportedly based on the author’s diligent work in the field of sociology of religion for some 50 years. Most are logical and follow well-documented studies. However, some are not so amenable to logical reasoning, and need further substantiation. Understandably, given the high number of propositions presented, there would be little space available to make a rigorous and protracted case for each. The author certainly could have pointed to further research and experiential evidence for the propositions, but that might only have obscured his more momentous findings. Again, an appreciable amount of time is spent on interesting propositions which are not critical to his primary thesis, while more time might have been spent producing further evidence for his central propositions. Nonetheless, the numerous clear definitions provided and the propositions that elaborated many essential aspects of religious behavior will be much appreciated by any reader – especially those with little commitment to established paradigms in the sociology of religion.

There is an inherent problem with investigating topics of a subjective nature by attempting to picture the whole via dismembering it into an array of disjointed, tiny pieces. As the saying goes, “you can’t see the forest for the trees.” A viewer may gaze on a beautiful garden at a distance, perceiving it to be manicured to perfection. However, walking within the garden will undoubtedly uncover an errant weed here and a withered blossom there. What is the observer then to make of the garden in question? Will he or she base an assessment on the macro or the micro view of the garden? Like the study of gardens, art, or beauty in general, the study of religion raises questions of this sort. Out of necessity, a critical evaluation of something like religion must be approached from within both vantage points. Furthermore, the subjective domains of “beauty” and “religion” must be treated with the dignity due them. And so it is with the book, *Why God?* The writer does indicate which ingredients must be present for an institution to be referred to as “religious.” And, as we have seen, morality is not a necessary ingredient given its absence from some religions. However, a god, gods, or the supernatural are necessary components of every religion, according to Stark’s substantive definition, compared to alternative functional definitions. The other major question Stark asks about religion in *Why God?* is what makes it indispensable to humankind? The author develops this to an extent, could have elaborated further.

Ultimately, Stark demonstrates that religion is an all-inclusive belief system that touches on every aspect of life, though some religions stress certain areas of life as more important than others. And so the religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans still had a clear message. In spite of the megalomaniacal gods (Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon, and others), religion still offered something of substance. Stark did not further develop this example, but the student of ancient history and philosophy will, after reading Stark, conclude that those religions stressed the importance of the choices that each person must make. The choice was the same one Achilles had to make. At the beginning of his adult life Achilles was confronted with two paths and their concomitant questions – would he aspire to become a courageous warrior whose honor and capabilities would be renowned long into the future, but lead to his premature death, or would he be content to be a wealthy farmer who experienced the pleasures of a long and fulfilled life? Greco-Roman religion teaches that a choice must be made. As Stark points out, all religions require choices regarding how one ought to live his or her life. Accordingly, all religions provide direction for the ultimate course of one’s life. Stark would seemingly say, though perhaps not emphatically enough, that only religion can provide meaning in life.

Rodney Stark’s volume is definitely recommendable. It is written for anyone with an interest in religion in general, and the general public, but especially the sociologist, will find it a useful resource. The volume includes helpful documentation of each of the propositions asserted. *Why God?* could easily be used as a teaching text in a course on religion, ethics, or philosophy, whether sociologically oriented or not. Finally, though Stark does not detail a

theory of religion here, the research presented is clearly built on the rational choice theory of religion he articulated earlier in *A Theory of Religion* (1989) and *Acts of Faith* (2000).

Paul Serwinek
William Tyndale College, MI